

Lawsuit says Aerojet put health at risk

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2nd claim after perchlorate found in 5 wells

By Peter Hecht
Bee Staff Writer

Forty-nine Rancho Cordova-area residents Monday filed a lawsuit against Aerojet General Corp. and three local water providers, charging that their health was imperiled by underground plumes of chemical contaminants drifting from the Aerojet plant in Rancho Cordova.

The lawsuit was the second legal claim filed against the defense contractor after recent revelations that a rocket fuel component called perchlorate was discovered in five wells near the plant.

At high doses, perchlorate can interfere with the thyroid function and — in extreme cases — cause bone marrow disease. However, federal and state officials have contended that the detected contamination levels were too low to trigger any significant health effects.

Monday's lawsuit filed by a Gold River law firm includes a wrongful-death allegation on behalf of a 61-year-old Rancho Cordova woman who recently died of leukemia. The suit, which seeks unspecified damages, also alleges that contamination from the Aerojet plant caused other injuries and illnesses and devalued residential properties in the area.

Eddie Cartwright, Aerojet's vice president for communications, said the company hadn't seen the lawsuit, "and until we do we're not really able to comment on it."

In the past, Aerojet officials have said they've aggressively responded to contamination problems, with the company and the Air Force spending more than \$160 million for toxic cleanup for the Aerojet site.

Since the early 1980s, Aerojet has installed monitoring wells and built six water treatment plants to remove 300,000 pounds of toxic solvents, including trichloroethylene and other volatile compounds. The contaminants were the result of dumping or burning of fuels and solvents during the Cold War era.

But environmental officials say technology wasn't available until recently to test for moderate levels of perchlorate, a rocket fuel component used to test launch vehicles for space and defense programs, including the Minuteman and Titan missiles and Delta satellite boosters.

Last year, perchlorate levels up to 16 times higher than drinking water standards suggested by state health officials showed up in five public wells near Aerojet and

Please see SUIT, page B3

B
8

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Suit: Law firm placed ad seeking perchlorate cases

Continued from page B1
in three other wells at nearby Mather Air Force Base. Regional water officials said they closed the wells and connected residents to alternative drinking water sources as soon as the contamination was detected.

"I think that this situation has been underplayed by the defendants, and they better come clean with the public," said Michael A. Hackard, an attorney for residents filing suit Monday. "It is clear this is a really serious situation."

One of Hackard's clients, Rancho Cordova resident John Blakeman, 64, said he decided to join the lawsuit after his wife, Susan,

61, died of leukemia. Earlier, Blakeman said he and a son both had thyroid surgery.

"I've got to be very honest. I don't know what caused it," noted Blakeman, who said he joined the lawsuit in a "search for the truth. I want somebody to look into it."

Hackard's law firm took out a display advertisement in the newspaper, asking potential clients - in capital letters - "Have you been damaged by perchlorate contamination?"

In December, a Southern California law firm that opened an office in Ranch Cordova filed a similar lawsuit on behalf of another 47 residents.

4
9